

1. Personal

I became interested in this as a result of the 'Ritual objects' project. I submitted some work from a previous project on figurative sculpture as well as 2 prayer rugs I had made specifically. This juxtaposition and the realisation that I might possibly find a market for more prayer rugs in the Muslim community but would be in big trouble (with my own conscience) if I also tried to sell Goddess images to the Pagan community made me wonder how I could pursue a new found interest in figurative sculpture. With Ramadan recently over, I finally wanted to find ways of integrating my actual background (a Eurasian Muslim, I lived my first 7 years in Spain and the Sudan) with the Western context in which I live, work and study.

2. Religious

It is still unthinkingly repeated, in most books which mention Islamic Art, that all representation, whether of the human figure, animals or plants, is forbidden by the Koran, and consequently Islamic Art tends to 'decorative' geometric patterns and calligraphy - both seen as making best of limitations. In fact, the use of geometry expresses the Pythagorean principle that a divine numerical harmony underlies appearances. This is both a very old and a very new idea. Sir James Jeans said "God is a mathematician". And where is the limitation in words, particularly the uncreated word of God (The Koran)? The Koranic prohibition is against the use of idols quite specifically and so need not be as restrictive as the Judaeo-Christian commandment against "a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth". In effect mosques contain no images, in scrupulous avoidance of misleading the faithful. No image of Allah, or his Prophet is permitted but for opposite reasons. Allah is divine, Mohammed was not.

3. Historical

When I thought about my research for the sculpture project it seemed that the parts of the Ancient World whose sculpture most appealed to me were basically the Eastern Mediterranean and eastwards to the Indus. These were also the first parts of the world to become Muslim (and largely they still are).

When divine revelation came to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century AD the Arabs lived on the borders of the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire. The Roman Empire (now centred on Constantinople/Byzantium) included Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean coastal regions generally. The Sassanian Persian Empire stretched from Mesopotamia to west of the Indus. Within about a century, Muslim armies had taken the Persian empire, the southern half of the Byzantine Empire and had gone beyond to Spain in the West and the Punjab in the East.

When I tried to discover what had happened to the vigorous sculptural traditions of these regions under the impact of Islam, I decided to look at all the Near Eastern and Islamic collections in the British Museum and the V&A. Interestingly, there was (almost) no work on display dated to between 400 and 700AD. This could be an irrelevant quirk of the Museum's administrations or a perception of collectors

that there was nothing of that date worth acquiring. However it is also likely that frequent disturbances that the 2 declining empires suffered, followed by their rapid military conquest occasioned considerable destruction. Any idols would certainly have borne the brunt of religious zeal.

However the early centuries AD are not very well represented either and there is almost no figurative sculpture. The small Coptic Art collection (2nd and 3rd centuries) concentrates on paintings, documents and textiles with a few funerary bas-relief portraits. The single statue is accompanied by a note emphasising how extremely rare sculpture in the round is in the Coptic context. Was the art of sculpture already in decline? Could this be due to Christian influence? This is all highly speculative but I would suggest not. In Late pagan Egypt under Roman rule, the 3D portrait on the mummy case was replaced with the 2D naturalistic portrait in encaustic on wood. The greatest period of Egyptian sculpture was long since over with the end of the New Kingdom (~1070BC).

What about further East? Throughout the succession of Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and finally Persian dynasties (from ~3000BC onwards) there is an increasing emphasis on relief sculpture and less and less in the round. By the Sassanian period (3rd to 7th centuries AD) there are still rock carvings but the finest figurative work is on silver dishes and is highly reminiscent of later painted pottery in the Islamic period.

It seems to me, then, that in the countries about to become Muslim there was already a shift of emphasis away from sculpture and towards illustrated or illuminated documents, painting or low relief work on various different surfaces and increasingly sophisticated textiles. All were later famous forms of Islamic Art. All were also vehicles of representational and particularly figurative work.

There are parallels with early Christian Art to the North and West of Muslim regions. The earliest examples of Roman Christian Art are the paintings found in the catacombs. By the 4th century AD, Jesus appears in these as a human figure, originally he was symbolised by a fish. Was this in obedience to the 2nd commandment or merely from necessity of secrecy? (The Edict of Milan allowing Christians freedom to worship was only promulgated in 313AD.) Later, the early Byzantine churches (circa 5th century AD) are famous for their internal mosaics. The use of icons (including sculpture apparently) did not become an issue until the 8th century when there was sufficient unease about idolatry to ban their veneration in 726AD. After continued controversy they were restored in 843AD. The masterpieces of Gothic Sculpture do not appear in the Western Church until the 12th century.

The early centuries of Church Art then also emphasised texts, textiles and walls. The worry about idolatry that images raised was clearly only sleeping - Reformation vandalism surely rivals anything Muslim. To me the interesting question is why both the Eastern and Western Churches introduced or tolerated the veneration of material objects at all, not why neither Muslims nor Jews would do so.

4. Contemporary

The Islamic World has not had either a Renaissance or an Enlightenment and so God has not really been dethroned. In some ways we may not have needed the Renaissance, certainly not to introduce us to Greek thought, science and mathematics - remembering that much Arab work was passed off as Greek to render it acceptable to Christian Europe just as elements in Greek writings regarded as 'magical' were ascribed to oriental interpolations! However, by the time of the Enlightenment in the

West, the last great Islamic empires were becoming decadent and fell increasingly under Western influence and control in the 19th and 20th centuries. We have even been reliant on imported Western ideas to try and free ourselves e.g. nationalism, socialism, communism.

Likewise in art the Qajar court painters (19th century Persia) were sent to the West to learn oil painting even though there was a nationalistic revival of other traditional arts e.g. glass consequent on the discovery of Persepolis. The 17th century Mogul painters interest in Western techniques and occasional experimentation became under the British Raj Lord Napier's definition of Indian painting as "European in technique but Indian in subject matter". Dr Akbar Naqvi suggested that this has not changed. Certainly as Wijdan Ali asserts "The training of all modern Islamic artists, whether at home or abroad, is Western-oriented and follows Western norms, aesthetics and rules". Luckily that is not the end of the story. Since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the pattern appears to be one of seeking training in the West and then returning home and trying not just to use Western techniques (oil, acrylic, plastics, etching, photography) on 'native' subject matter still classified as portraits, landscape, still life, genre etc. but to do something more complex and difficult. They seem to wish to avoid Orientalism i.e. to see with their own eyes and convey that with whatever techniques they choose.

The figurative work which I have seen I do not think treats the human body in the same way as in the West. One obvious point is that, clothed or unclothed, the female body is not automatically seen sexually. This also seems to mean an absence of disgust - so commonly experienced in connection with sexuality in European culture that it has been theorised as necessary. Woman artists, therefore, in dealing with the female figure have not needed to react by either celebrating or denying female sexuality and so the feminist content of their work can be much more sophisticated.

The strong influence of nationalistic socialism (or socialistic nationalism) particularly in the Arab World has led I think to a sympathetic rendering of their fellow-citizens and even sometimes in sculpture a monumental humanism which seems almost out of date in Europe. However this is unlike the classical idealisation of the (usually male) body. Naqvi is right that secular humanism has little meaning in Pakistan (or in the rest of the Islamic world) however much it may be the de facto Western 'religion'. Perhaps, however, there is a kind of humanism coming out of an Islamic background which manages to avoid the popular Western artists' stance of contempt for their audience? Perhaps it is just a luxury which any 3rd World artist cannot afford - racism abroad and political struggles at home cannot be ignored. Thus it is that actually 20th century art from Islamic countries has been overwhelmingly figurative and this includes the sculpture, although this is still a small proportion (except perhaps in the Sudan).

Conclusion

The main pre-Islamic uses of sculpture were the depiction of deities, portraits of rulers (often also deified) and funerary portraits. Under Islam there was little occasion for this last as Islam prescribes very plain burials in unmarked graves for all. Any appearance of idols would be carefully avoided and so much figurative work appeared as painting rather than sculpture. This points up how many figurative images were divine rather than human in the pagan world.

A humanism which is not necessarily atheistic has led to increasing interest in figurative sculpture in modern times.

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